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CAN WE WRITE AFRICAN HISTORY?

BY BASIL DAVIDSON

OCCASIONAL PAPER NO. 1



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CAN WE WRITE AFRICAN HISTORY?

In offering what is essentially a writer's contribution to the solving of certain major problems of form in writing African history, I stand with some assurance on the belief that history, whether or not it be a branch of science, is certainly a branch of literature. Not the least of our problems, after all, is that of ordering an already large but rapidly growing body of material into an acceptably readable framework; after several efforts of various kinds, it now seems to me that this simply cannot be done without the aid of some broad scheme of periodisation. For otherwise, without this aid, one is forced either to plod from region to region, more or less confusingly and repetitively, or else abandon all hope of providing a continental view of the African past: one is obliged, in short, to abandon the hope of writing precisely that kind of regionally integrated history which seems increasingly possible, useful, and imposed by the facts. In what follows, accordingly, I propose a scheme of periodisation which seems to me both sufficient to meet the facts — or, rather, to enable the facts to be met — and to enable us to advance through our material phase by phase, detaching the general movement of history as it unfolds, relating one region to another (or noting the reasons for a lack of relationship), and helpfully pausing at a few clear "points of continental change."

The question of periodisation has been discussed before. It was argued, for example, at the Fourth Seminar of the International African Institute in 1961. Although no new solutions were proposed there, the assembled historians found the application to Africa of familiar European periods — Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and so forth — of little or no value, although they were generally at one in thinking that such tentative terms as had appeared in previous years — Pre-Islamic, Period of the Great Discoveries, Period of the Slave Trade, to mention only three — belonged to the colonial past when history in Africa was considered possible, or, at any rate, desirable, only from a non-African standpoint. Failing any new proposals, the distinguished editors of the Seminar Proceedings fell back gracefully, if, as one may think, a trifle cautiously, upon the agreeable formula that unanimity in this delicate matter of periodisation would be surely reached one fine day by "the wisdom of men struggling for the triumph of truth."¹

This left the question pretty much where it had been before. Yet the question has become a good deal more pressing since then, for

the simple reason that the problems of writing coherent African history, narrative history, have since then become a good deal greater, and this for two reasons: first, from the continued and continuing accumulation of new interpretations, facts, and probable facts; and, second, from the need to fit these not solely into their local or regional setting, but also into a wider continental framework. And so it becomes increasingly obvious from a practical point of view — in this respect, from a writer's point of view — that no lucid or meaningful approach to this towering mass of material is any longer feasible without the help of a system of interpretive periods, even if this system has to be revised, as no doubt it will be, by the larger wisdom of the future. And why, indeed, be afraid of interpretation? "The attempt to distinguish periods in history is a mark of advanced and mature historical thought, not afraid to interpret facts instead of merely ascertaining them."² When Collingwood wrote those words some thirty years ago nobody was thinking very much, if they were thinking at all, about the possibility of writing African history. Today we have a different situation. Today the only real question in this matter is whether or not we are sufficiently far advanced as to justify attempting the step toward "advanced and mature historical thought." How far, in other words, can we now write African history — as distinct from accumulating facts and listing hypotheses? What follows here is nothing very original, but rather an attempt to consider these questions in the light of recent experiments, including, if I may, some of my own.

The starting point is that the condition of African history now yields a picture of long, continuous, and broadly definable movement from one phase of socio-political relationships to another; and that this picture is generally valid, if with many partial modifications, for every large region of the continent. Thirty years ago, or even less, this kind of statement would have seemed perfectly absurd. Our predecessors generally saw nothing in the African past that was remotely like this. Whenever they cared to look, which was seldom enough, all they could discern was stagnation quickened only by the advent of European contact and conquest. Characteristic of their attitude was that of Egerton, sometime professor of Colonial History at Oxford. "What had happened" with the coming of the Europeans, Egerton believed (and in believing it he was anything but eccentric), was "the introduction of order into blank, uninteresting, brutal barbarism."³ Coupland, eminent teacher of Colonial History at the same university

somewhat later, thought the same. African history, he expounded, had begun in the middle of the nineteenth century. Before then there had been nothing, or nothing worthy of attention. The "main body of the Africans . . . had stayed, for untold centuries, sunk in barbarism . . . stagnant, neither going forward nor going back."⁴ There is no need here to comment further on such views; later learning has effectively disposed of them. What has been less noticed, perhaps, is that the picture we are now getting is not merely one of socio-political movement over a long period of time — something which might have been inferred in any case, even without new facts — but, much more interestingly, one of definable phases of growth: not only process, in short, but also progress.

Regional periodisation has already gone quite far.

In Kushite studies, for example, the marked contrast in political and cultural organization and content between Napatan and Meroitic Kush, noted more than half a century ago, is now modified and further explained by the introduction of a number of subperiods for each of them. Thus Adams has lately proposed three main subperiods for Napatan Kush, and has underlined the cultural change and advance which began with what he has called the Meroitic renaissance in the fourth century B.C.⁵ He has likewise given us a tentative periodisation for Christian Nubia.⁶ Much the same kind of sharper definition is becoming available for Axumite origins and growth in the wake of the French archaeological discoveries of the 1950's.⁷ Westward through the northern Sahara and littoral, the growth of Berber bronze-age culture is now seen to have held a place of special importance not only in itself, but also in relation to the origins and early development of the trans-Saharan caravan trade of western Phoenicia and, in later Iron Age times, of Roman Africa as well.⁸

Southward across the Sahara, the beginnings of an Iron Age some two thousand years ago are fixed, with reasonable certitude, as marking the foundation of new types of social systems which spread and enclosed more and more peoples not only of the grassland country, but also of the rain-forest regions and the plateau lands beyond. For some of these it is already possible to detect phases of growth in terms of greater centralization of political power: the forming of state bureaucracies, the adoption of literacy, and the elaboration of more effective techniques of commodity production and exchange. And all this, we may note, is increasingly the case not merely with

the familiar cases, such as those of Mali and Songhay, but also with other systems where the written documentation is either negligible or altogether lacking. At the historians' seminar mentioned above, M. G. Smith was, for example, able to devote a paper to "an outline of Hausa development during the 'Dark Age of Hausaland' which may be said to end with the fifteenth century," while he could conclude by showing how reforms such as those of Muhamad Rumfa of Kano (1465-99) introduced "a medieval society of city-states."⁹ Even for the interior of a territory as obscurely and apparently baffling in its historical outline as the Ivory Coast, Person on the same occasion could offer a broad periodisation from the fourteenth century, linking this to the whole development of central Guinea, to the foundation of the Bono and Dagomba states, to the opening of new trade routes between the central forest area and the markets of the Middle Niger, and, foreshadowed by all this, to the subsequent emergence of a most powerful state-system, that of Asante, in a region which was now of great potential wealth and power.¹⁰

In other regions, it has been much the same, though with varying degrees of clarity and certainty. The historical states of the Congo Basin may now be seen to have developed from a few main centers of socio-political growth. In Uganda we have imposing if as yet largely unexplained archaeological evidence for Iron Age systems of the same general period, as well as unusually good oral tradition for different and more centralized states during a later period. Recent excavation by Chittick along the East Coast has begun to yield a sound chronological framework after the twelfth century for city-states such as Kilwa. Further south, the archaeologists have again led the way with a periodised scheme of Iron Age development for the stone-building cultures of the central plateau and even for the lands to the south of the Limpopo. And Desmond Clark, opening a still wider perspective, has told us that "in another decade it is certain that a firm chronology will have become available" for the "history of the spread of Negroid and Bantu culture into the sub-continent."¹¹

In terms of this same wide perspective, reaching far back into an absolutely nonliterate past, the linguists likewise have new and interesting things to say. They appear to be finding more and more reason to emphasize what Armstrong has lately called "the immense antiquity of West African languages and therefore of West African cul-

ture" — a statement which need not, of course, be limited to West Africa — and to emphasize the profound unities which seem to underlie the cultures of the greater part of the continent.¹²

As a further argument for some agreement on periodisation at this stage, there is the fact that many scholars now seem agreed that the old and rigid dividing line between what was considered to be history and what otherwise belonged to prehistory should be abandoned as obscuring more than it can possibly reveal. Here, too, one may see an evolution of thought. When they first began challenging the widespread notion that history began with the coming of the Europeans, Africanists were still pretty much on the defensive. Knowing that they must rely largely on nonliterate evidence, they tended to speak not of history but of ethnohistory, inviting us to enter, as it were, a sort of antechamber of the subject, an antechamber that was under the same roof as history itself, but was not really endowed with the same historical status or equipped with as good a kind of historical furniture. This understandably defensive approach was abandoned by the historians at Dakar four years ago. Yet the real *coup de grace*, it seems to me, was delivered not by an historian, but by an anthropologist, and as long ago as 1950. Then it was that Evans-Pritchard, in his celebrated Marett Lecture, declared that "social anthropology is a kind of historiography," and that "social anthropologists can provide the historian of the future with some of his best records . . . and they can shed on history, by their discovery of latent structural forms, the light of universals."¹³ He carried this Collingwood-like pronouncement a good deal further in 1961 by agreeing with Maitland's dictum that "anthropology must choose between being history and being nothing," duly qualifying this with a dictum of his own that "history must choose between social anthropology or being nothing."¹⁴ The writing of history, in other words, could only be the outcome of a creative combination of all those disciplines which can reveal the process and the progress of human society since the earliest times, and can therefore build for any given generation what Carr has described as "a coherent relation between past and future,"¹⁵ or display, as Africans may be more inclined to see it, the true community and continuity of man within his threefold condition of ancestor, man-alive, and babe as yet unborn.

But even though one rubs out the arbitrary line between prehistory and history, one still has to begin somewhere. And here the

difficulty is manifestly much greater than in Europe. The literacy of the Greeks offered a pleasantly helpful starting point for European history. But once you accept that literacy in itself is no adequate guide to social development — to the stuff of history — where do you begin in Africa? The very fact that nearly all books of general African history make at least a bow in the direction of Stone Age origins reflects the fluidity of a situation where there seems no good reason, once the test of written documents is given up, why history should not go back if it can to those little furry creatures, the Australopithecines, who seem to have been so much more ingenious than we thought they were: a point of view extremely well and authoritatively illustrated only the other day when the *Journal of African History* published a survey by Desmond Clark of the “prehistoric origins of African culture.”¹⁶

If the term “prehistory” is to go the way of “ethnohistory” — and this is what seems to be happening — there remains the general plan of periodisation already in use or evolution by the prehistorians, a plan that does in fact yield the two desiderata necessary for historical periodisation: process and progress, or socio-cultural movement by reference to the inherent but ceaselessly changing relationship between material culture and social organization. This, of course, lies outside my argument here: I bring it in only as a prelude to arguing that, having accepted this kind of plan (however presently obscured by the jungle of its terminology) as an organic part of history, it can become relatively easy to fit subsequent phases into an extension and cultural enlargement of the same kind of plan. From the late neolithic, that is to say, we pass into metal-using cultures which, partly but essentially because they *are* metal-using, become progressively more and more different, definably different, from their Stone Age predecessors. We pass, in short, into an age of increasing social production, a production which leads for the first time to a surplus of food and other goods, a surplus which cumulatively promotes a whole series of new departures associated in one form or another with metal working and metal using: departures which include an early stratification of societies into rulers and ruled, the emergence of primitive state-systems, the projection of kings into gods, the crystallization of craftsman castes, the early growth of production for exchange, trade in these commodities, and, generally, the routing of African mankind onto that particular course of social movement which has continued through the centuries to the present day.

With all this, it seems evident that future histories of Africa must begin with at least some account of the origins of *homo sapiens* and his diversification, and pass from there to that sinuous complex of development associated with the shift to mesolithic and neolithic cultures in the valley of the Nile and the green Sahara; with the emergence of dynastic Egypt and its history; with the Saharan diaspora as the Makalian Wet phase comes to an end after about 2000 B.C.; with the bronze age of the Berbers; with the growth of Kush, Axum, and comparable "post-Egyptian" cultures; and with the neolithic in the Western and Central Sudan. But for Africa south of the Sahara, or at any rate south of the Sudan, the crucial point of change clearly occurs with the earliest metal-using cultures — effectively, iron-using cultures — about two thousand years ago; and it is with this shift that another main period can be seen to begin. The using and making of iron tools and weapons emerge with remarkable rapidity in one region after another, opening up new land, carrying Bantu-speaking and other peoples into a vast unfurling of new populations, pushing cultivation and stock-raising far into the southland, generally laying foundations for all those phases of change which historians now increasingly reveal. Even so, just where and at what approximate date can the starting point of this Iron Age be most helpfully placed? Perhaps the best answer to this may turn out to be the reign of Nastasen of Kush (335-315 B.C. on Hintze's dating);¹⁷ for it is with Nastasen that the Meroitic renaissance may be said to begin, or at any rate to get into its stride. Kush becomes a distinctively non-Egyptian system and culture. It develops its own alphabet and cursive script, extends its international trade, and, what matters most of all in this connection, builds a large ironmaking industry.

Then we have several transitional cultures to the west and south. Of these, the most revealing, in its evidence for western Africa, is at present that of the Nok Culture of the Niger-Benue confluence region. Another carbon date has lately confirmed the view that ironmaking began here around 250 B.C., and it may be supposed with some confidence that traces of other such early "siderolithic" cultures will be found in this wide region. Comparable transitional cultures appear well established in the southern Congo Basin and across the central plateau as far south as the Limpopo within another 500 years or less. And by the end of the first millenium, if not before, early Iron Age cultures have spread beyond the Limpopo into the northern and

central parts of modern South Africa, as well as far to the east and west.¹⁸

By the eighth century, or thereabout, we have clear evidence, in several large regions, of socio-economic growth associated with the emergence of early state-systems which already possess a growing if still marginal interest in commodity production and exchange. The gold traders of the Western Sudan are identified by North Africans as belonging to the powerful state we now call Ancient Ghana. A probably Bantu-speaking polity in Katanga is producing copper on no mean scale, and trading in it as well. Within another hundred years the chiefs of another metal-using polity in present Zambia are being buried with gold ornaments imported from south of the Zambezi. And then, with the middle of the tenth century, we have Mas'udi's celebrated description of the kingdom of the Warlimi somewhere around the Lower Zambezi basin, while the gold trade with the Indian Ocean traders has undoubtedly begun. Within something like a thousand years, that is to say, the greater part of this vast and varied continent has passed from Late Stone Age cultures to farming and metal-using systems which contain within themselves the seeds of very fruitful growth.

If we can accept an Early Iron Age beginning with Meroitic Kush in the fourth century B.C., where should we draw the next big line? Where should we mark the transition to mature Iron Age cultures: to all those systems and polities which signal the flowering and full realization of the potentials of growth inherent in the seeds of Early Iron Age development? There will never be, one feels, any more exact answer to this than to a similar question directed at the beginning of the European Middle Ages. But do we need an exact answer? All we need, surely, is a date, an approximate date, which can notify the onset of another broad phase of significant change in a sufficiently large number of regions. This looks something like A.D. 1000.

Not, admittedly, if we apply it to North Africa. So far as the Muslim systems of North Africa are concerned, there seems no good reason for picking on the years around A.D. 1000 as particularly meaningful. True enough, we have the coming of the Bani Hilal devastations around 1050, but these affect only the eastern and central Maghreb; Morocco, by contrast, acquires a new extension and

deepening of Muslim culture with the almost contemporary rise of the Almoravid reformers, and this is carried still further by the Almo-hads, who do not end their dynasty until 1289. Nor is it sensible to think of the Christian kingdoms of the Eastern Sudan, which reach their zenith in the eleventh century, as belonging to an Early Iron Age; and one can think of other such difficulties in the way of making this data a "line of pause."

All the same, elsewhere in the continent — and precisely in the nonliterate sub-Saharan regions where the movement of history remains most difficult to fix — this terminal line of about A.D. 1000 does offer some advantages. By this time there are at least two large Iron Age systems in the Western Sudan, Ghana, and Kanem-Bornu, whose organization may reasonably be said to have passed beyond the phase of primitive experiment. There are several large market centers or incipient cities, such as Audagost, Gao, and probably Kumbi, where techniques of trading-exchange are relatively advanced, and may even be connected with early credit systems. And, as we may safely infer from what was to happen next, there is also a number, perhaps quite a large number, of smaller systems poised on the brink of vigorous development. Kangaba is one of these; Tekrur is another. To this period, likewise, there may possibly be attributed some notable trends such as the spread of Mande and Hausa systems out of their respective homelands to west and east of the Middle Niger region; moreover, linked with all this, there may have been the emergence of the earliest Yoruba polities. For some of these new systems, Islam now begins to grow attractive as an ideology for central government and for providing new techniques for long-range trade. At the outset of the twelfth century, as the tombstone shows, the kings of Gao have accepted Islam at least as one of their state religions, while tradition gives 1086 as the first Muslim king of Kanem-Bornu. The early twelfth century similarly brings a new stone-building culture into existence on the southern plateau between the Zam-bezi and the Limpopo, while other evidence of various kinds, though often rather fragile, indicates that many small Iron Age polities are now established in the Rift Valley highlands of the East. Along the east coast, at the same time, city-states like Kilwa have become important in the expanding network of the Indian Ocean trade. Writing in the mid-twelfth century, Idrisi hears that Javanese sailors regularly visit the southeastern coast of Africa and carry its iron

to India.¹⁹ The influence of long-range trade on the development, if not on the formation, of a number of important states is already clear.

If the term "Early Iron Age," at least for sub-Saharan Africa, may be defined as the period of emergence and establishment of metalworking, agriculture, and associated adaptation to new forms of community life and government, then it does seem reasonable to bring this Early Iron Age to an end around A.D. 1000. If we do so, however, it becomes clear that this Early Iron Age is not immediately or even quickly followed by anything that resembles a mature development of its socio-political potentialities. There follows, on the contrary, an intermediate period of about three centuries before we get a much greater extension of Early Iron Age structures.

This Intermediate Period after A.D. 1000 varies in length. For the Western Sudan, there is a time of confusion after the collapse of the Ghana system, involving a number of wars of succession between contending rivals — before the firm grip of Mali, under Sudiata and Mansa Musa, takes hold at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries. When it does take hold, however, Mali appears to display a notable advance on Ghana. I say "appears" because pitifully little is known of twelfth-century Ghana; yet Mali of the fourteenth century is undoubtedly a much more successful and coherent — and even, to some extent, bureaucratic — effort at enclosing a wide area of the Western Sudan within a single system of revenue and centralized power. The mere fact, at least in al-Omari's hearsay, that Musa used literate clerks makes only one piece of evidence to suggest that Islam has now begun to have its sophisticating effect on the towns where the kings rule, even though the everyday life of the peasants has changed but little. One suspects, however, that the everyday life of the peasants has changed a good deal: by all the signs, there is a considerable extension of tribute or servile labour — the "wageless labour" of a precash economy — and a correspondingly greater surplus for kings and city-folk who know how to secure and organize this labour. The history of the Muslim states has to a large extent become the history of city-governments which have learned how to exploit peasant labour power and to defend their exploitation by armed force. Elsewhere, there are comparable changes. Towards 1400, for example, the Mossi states emerge under their early warrior chiefs. In the Akan country, the gold trade begins to be organized and extended by new methods: Bono comes into

being, and the Dyula traders from the northeast establish themselves at Begho so as to link this trade with Jenne and other entrepôts of the Middle Niger. A new line of rulers appears in Yorubaland. Benin acquires a fully historical dynasty of kings and grows more powerful.

All this, and much else, reveals a greatly different situation from the period around A.D. 1000. From about 1300 onward, this new situation continues to evolve: there is the steady movement into more tightly organized forms of state structure, the growth in Muslim areas of literate bureaucracies, and the gradual emergence of long-service armies as rulers come increasingly to rely upon their Muslim townsmen and upon their capacity to impose tribute services and to mobilize labour power, increasingly employing for these purposes a corps of soldiers who stand outside the traditional lineage loyalties of old. Large regions are increasingly linked by commercial and political ties in a way that is much more systematic than before. One good example is the Karanga empire of the Monomotapa. Emerging in the fifteenth century, this empire was clearly established by reference to principles and motives that are comparable to those of the Sudanese imperial systems: typologically they belong together, although the impact of Islam remains insignificant in the south. For, just as the empires of the Western Sudan had a major interest in extending their control over a wide area of tribute and production for exchange, depending for their outlets on the Berber traders of the north, so did the Karanga and their neighbours have a major interest in a similarly large area of tribute and production for exchange, relying for their outlets on the Muslim Swahili traders — the “Moors” of the Portuguese records — of the southeastern seaboard.

Our Early Iron Age, then, begins about 350 B.C. and comes to an end about A.D. 1000, being followed by an Intermediate Period of some three centuries which form the prelude or first phase of a Mature Iron Age that will carry African society to its peak of “pre-European” development. If this seems reasonable — and I am conscious, of course, of the need for a closer definition of a kind that must remain impossible within the limits of a brief statement — where does the next dividing line occur? Here we are on less controversial ground. Most practitioners seem to agree that A.D. 1600 marks some kind of turning point in the history of the African past.

This is not to say that Iron Age structures characteristic of Africa everywhere realize their inherent potentials of growth by 1600, nor that following years witness only the decline of "classical structures" until, with the 1950's, we can at least break through colonial doors toward a total reconstruction.

This African "Middle Ages" — this Mature Iron Age, as I should prefer to call it — comes to an end around 1600. There now begins an equally long period, essentially an Age of Transition, which must itself be subdivided into a number of lesser periods. These include, for example, the post-Songhay reorganization of power in the central and western regions of the Western Sudan; the Muslim Revival Movement; the growth of new polities in Guinea, such as Oyo, Abomey, and Asante; in East Africa, the partial revival of the Swahili cities and then the extension and crises of the coastal slave trade; European encroachment along the seaboard of the seventeenth century; conquest and the colonial period; and, lastly, the present phase of post-colonial reconstruction. The actual "point of change," if any such neat moment of chronological break can be sensibly extracted from a process so very complex, occurs at different times in different places. For the Western Sudan it falls in 1591 with the Songhay disaster at Tondibi and Moroccan conquest. For the Guinea seaboard it comes a little later with the tremendous expansion of the Atlantic slave trade. For the East Coast it strikes as early as 1498; with the arrival of da Gama and the years of ruin that immediately follow. For North Africa, less identifiable than elsewhere, this "point of change" may lie with the Ottoman advances of the early and middle sixteenth century; for southernmost Africa it can be fixed as late as 1652, when van Riebeeck goes fatefully ashore on the Cape of Good Hope. Yet 1600 seems a reasonable compromise among these regional dates.

From about 1600, then, a new situation begins to unfold. It is anything but simple, and yet it seems to be concerned with two principal trends.

First, there is the continued growth and evolution of a large number, perhaps a very large number, of political systems; but for a long time — indeed, with a few notable exceptions, right up till colonial times — this growth and evolution take place predominantly within the framework of existing structures: within the framework,

that is, of Iron Age subsistence economies modified marginally by production for exchange. There are many revolutions, but they always fail to change the basic order of society; more exactly, they are not revolutions, but reforms or attempts at reform. In the Western Sudan, for example, the fall of the Songhay system is followed by the revolt of the peasants against the towns. The servile peoples throw off their tribute obligations. The Muslim traders and rulers fail in strength and influence. There comes the rise of pagan peasant systems such as those of Segu and Kaarta, already prefigured, indeed, by the overthrow of the Soninke Muslims of Tekrur in the middle of the sixteenth century.

Yet these peasant pagan systems may be seen, if we follow the same regional example a little further, to march the same road as their predecessors. They, too, adapt to urban life, go in for trade, reforge the old caravan links, and settle themselves into another variant of the old "city-empire" structure. And this recurs in still another form. After 1725, with the formation of the imamate of Futa Jallon, there opens the long and vivid period of Muslim revival. Here the intention of "going back to the past" is frankly avowed. "In their search for the ideal society and the just ruler," as Charles Smith has written, "they looked back to a previous golden age in the history of the dar al-Islam, and their aim was to recreate in the Western Sudan the society of the Rightly-Guided Caliphate."²⁰ In this, of course, they and those whom they inspired were embraced by an illusion: they looked back to a "just society" whose real strength had lain precisely in a deepening social stratification which presupposed and reinforced the great privilege of rulers over ruled, rich over poor, and strong over weak. In another way, the new systems of the Forest Belt were likewise, in their essence, a repetition of the past — or, rather, an evolution from the basis of the past: though immensely more powerful and impressively successful, Asante can reasonably be seen as Bono writ large, while the Fon system in Dahomey, even if it does introduce new elements of rule and order, is little different in kind from the Yoruba empire of Oyo. In short, there is important and intelligent elaboration and internal growth, and there is a great and interesting variation of basic structure; but there is no essentially new departure.

Yet new departures were greatly needed now. For after 1600 there is a second trend; and it is this second trend, more and more

insistently, which supplies the factor of disturbance, the factor of transition. Often hard to isolate, it is constantly at work, subtly and indirectly eating at the foundations of established order and nagging at the certainties of accepted tradition. Iron Age Africa wrestles with its problems. New patterns are forged. New kinds of leaders appear. New imperatives are faced. Yet Iron Age Africa falls more and more behind a Euro-American world that is now moving rapidly into an age of science, mechanical invention, and early industrialism. No doubt, as Patel has lately argued,²¹ the actual difference in average standards of living does not greatly widen; what undoubtedly does widen, and widen enormously, is the potential of economic and technological growth. During this Age of Transition, the opening impacts of a widening power differential between Africa and Europe may be small and local, but they ruthlessly expand and spread. If they can be seen to begin with the Portuguese ravages along the East Coast or in Angola during the sixteenth century, or with the rise of the Niger Delta city-states in the seventeenth, they gradually impinge on other regions. Late in the eighteenth century, the Atlantic trade has become a major shaping factor along much of the western littoral, while, with the nineteenth century, it seems not too much to say that the greater part of Africa is plunged ever more deeply into crisis, a crisis that comes partly from the incapacity of Iron Age ideologies and modes of action to cope with the problems of future growth, and partly from the pressures of European action. Applied though they often are by men of outstanding courage and intelligence, the old solutions will no longer work.

My point here, briefly, is that after about 1600, the greater part of Africa moves out of its customary certainties and modes of organization into a long transitional grapple with the challenges and problems of adjustment posed by what we may call modern society. During the nineteenth century this rises to a power and violence whose impact may be seen on many sides. It may be seen, for example, in the starting and the spread of the East Coast slave trade or in the ending of the West Coast slave trade. It may be seen in the wars of wandering of southeastern Africa, in the Yoruba conflicts of succession, after the evacuation of Old Oyo, or in the harsh and weary battles of the Western Sudan. It may be seen in the steady encroachment of Europeans along the seaboard as well as in their final invasion and conquest. Upon all this there follows a prolonged interlude of destructive subjection and foreign occupation whose main

achievement was not to carry Africa into a new world, for any such service lay beyond its purpose or capacity, but merely to complete the dismantlement of the old. And what we are witnessing today, in all its inevitably contradictory questioning and confusion, is the last great phase in this often tumultuous and always dramatic Age of Transition: the attempt by one means or another, under one guise or another, to establish African society upon the foundations of industry and science, to place Africans upon a footing of manifest equality with all their fellow men, and to finish, once and for all, with the ideological servitudes of our racialist past.

Summary

This paper proposes a broad periodisation of African history, beginning with the Kushite Iron Age, as follows:

c 350 BC - AD 1000	<i>Early Iron Age</i>
c AD 1000 - 1300	<i>Intermediate Period to</i>
c AD 1300 - 1600	<i>Mature Iron Age</i>
c AD 1600 - Present	<i>Age of Transition</i>

It presents arguments for adopting this scheme of periodisation, or something like it, and points to a number of the subperiods already adopted or in need of adoption. It argues, with Collingwood, that “the attempt to distinguish periods in history is a mark of advanced and mature historical thought, not afraid to interpret facts instead of merely ascertaining them”; and it affirms that the writing of African history cannot any longer be undertaken successfully without the aid of some such scheme of periodisation as the one prescribed here.

FOOTNOTES

1. *The Historian in Tropical Africa*: Studies presented and discussed at the Fourth Seminar of the International African Institute, Dakar, 1961. Edited by J. Vansina, R. Mauny, and L. V. Thomas, Oxford, 1964, p. 27.
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6. ———, "An Introductory Classification of Christian Nubian Pottery," *Kush*, vol. 10, p. 245.
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9. M. G. Smith, "The Beginnings of Hausa Society, AD 1000-1500," *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, p. 339.
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15. E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, London, 1961, p. 114.
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18. For relevant C 14 datings, consult lists compiled by B. M. Fagan, *Journal of African History*, 1 of vol. 2, 1 of vol. 4, and 1 of vol. 6.
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21. S. J. Patel, "Economic Transition in Africa," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 3 of vol. 1, p. 319.

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